

Two nations clearly defined at Republican convention

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NEW ORLEANS STAFF REPORT

NEW YORK—On the last night of the Republican convention in Miami Beach, one of the young protestors waved in the direction of the hall and said: "Plastic people, with their hotel rooms for \$50 a night. That's what you learn to be in America. Why don't the television and papers tell about us?"

Over on Collins Avenue two women in long dresses, wives of delegates, were walking toward the hall because the demonstrators had blocked the traffic. One said: "They're cowards—sticking tires and throwing paint and frightening old people. Why don't they keep this damn trash off TV and put on our good young people?"

A mobile country

Americans have always thought of their society as different from those of Europe because it lacked distinctions of class. There was the race problem, yes. But that apart, a person could not ordinarily be placed by his accent or his parentage or his school. It was a mobile country, socially as well as economical-

ly. No one who observed Miami Beach in Republican Week could put much faith any more in the notion of a seamless America. Between those inside the hall and the demonstrators outside there was the deepest of divides, not of class but of attitudes toward national and individual responsibility. Keith Ross, 25 years old, tall, with long blond hair, served as an infantry

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scout in Vietnam from June, 1967, to June, 1968—a very hard time to be in Vietnam. He had hitchhiked from California to try to tell people how he felt about the war.

'We have feelings'

"The thing is we have feelings," he said. "We care. Those people in the hall have lost whatever feelings they had. They're just swept along, generation after generation. We're not going to be swept along. We want to show that."

He and others with him had hand-lettered signs against the war. They shouted: "It's not just dikes, you know. It's people—wives like yours."

Was anyone listening? Not very likely. The police had walled the peaceful demonstrators off from the convention crowd behind old buses parked end to end. And even if the delegates and their friends had come close to the signs and the voices, they would probably not really have seen or heard.

Not one word

Television coverage suggested as much. There was film of the demonstrators, but not much that conveyed their message. The television audience could not have sensed the poignancy of the Vietnam veterans, walking slowly along in their fatigues or wheeling their wheel-

chairs, trying to make Americans understand what they are doing to human beings across the world. And in the hall itself there was not one word of debate about Vietnam.

Of course the demonstrators were not all serious and peaceful. Some did indeed knife tires and throw paint and

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rough up delegates. Their frustration could not excuse the violence. Ordinary citizens had reason to be frightened; the police did well to prevent worse.

But the smugness inside the hall, the deadly lack of human feeling, was worse in its own way. After listening to a veteran describe what he saw in Vietnam, it was obscene to hear Rep. Gerald Ford tell the convention that four more years of the Nixon Administration would be "The greatest opportunity for peace in the history of mankind."

Party of the smooth

It was a party of the smooth in that hall, the collective image, money, success. There were a few working people, and maybe even an intellectual or two somewhere, but the watch was on against anyone who might rock the boat with ideas from right or left. "This is America," one observer re-

marked, and she was right in a way. The Republican delegates were more representative than the Democrats had been of one powerful strain in American life: The wish for success and comfort, for insulation from others' misery. Those are quite understandable desires, and they have often made a political majori-

ty by combining those who aspire with those who have achieved.

That is the America of Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's words about the spirit of Munich: "It is the daily condition of those who have given themselves up to the thirst after prosperity at any price, to material well-being as the chief goal of earthly existence."

But there is another America. The two were there in Miami Beach, not belonging to each other, not listening. The image that will remain is of five young men and women in black robes and white masks, symbols of death in Vietnam, singing "God Bless America" in a deserted street outside the convention hall with gas in the air. Their only audience was a group of helmeted state troopers.

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